Mothers with Physical Disabilities Share Strategies to Care for their Young Children

A study funded by the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR).

Women with physical disabilities are about as likely to become mothers as similar-aged women without disabilities. Mothers with physical disabilities may need to use adaptations in order to care for their young children. For example, they may use assistive technology or adaptations in technique or equipment in order to safely lift or carry their children, change diapers, feed or bathe their babies, or keep their toddlers safe. Healthcare providers and social workers may have concerns about how a disability might affect a new mother’s ability to care for their child. However, they may not know much about how to best support a pregnant woman or a new mother with a physical disability, and it may be helpful to learn more about possible strategies from women with disabilities who had successful experiences caring for their children. In a recent NIDILRR-funded study, researchers examined existing data on experiences of mothers with physical disabilities to identify and describe the adaptive strategies they used to care for their young children.

Researchers at the National Research Center for Parents with Disabilities examined data from interviews with 25 mothers with physical disabilities who participated in a study of the health needs and experiences before, during, and after pregnancy of women with physical disabilities. The participants had at least one child under the age of 10, and they reported having a physical disability that affected their ability to walk, their use of their hands or arms, or both. The participants were asked about their experiences when their children were infants and toddlers. They were asked about adaptations, modifications, or supports that they used to help them care for their young children.

The researchers found that the participants mentioned five major types of adaptations they used when caring for their young children. These were:

1. Acquiring or modifying babycare equipment: The participants described needing to ensure that equipment such as cribs, baby slings, and changing tables were accessible to them. The participants used a combination of buying standard equipment, buying specially designed equipment, and modifying standard equipment themselves so that it was accessible. For example, some of the participants described lowering the height of a changing table or modifying or purchasing a specially-designed crib that allowed them to lift the baby in and out while seated in their wheelchair.

2. Adapting the home environment: The participants described making changes to their home environment so that they could navigate the home and reach needed babycare items more easily. For example, some participants described placing
babycare items in each room in order to minimize travel around the home while carrying the baby.

3. Accessing information and supports: The participants stated that they often searched for information on the Internet and sought support from other parents with and without disabilities, especially other mothers with similar disabilities. Some of the participants described peer support from other parents with similar disabilities as being very helpful to brainstorm tips and tricks for overcoming specific challenges, while others were disappointed at difficulties in finding other parents with disabilities. Some of the participants also described difficulty feeling accepted in mainstream parenting groups.

4. Developing communication strategies to facilitate safety: The participants described teaching their young children safety rules such as staying in their mother's line of sight, or holding their hands when walking, and staying engaged in conversation with them to monitor their safety. These strategies ensured that the mothers would not have to chase after their children to keep them safe.

5. Receiving assistance from others: The participants described utilizing assistance from others with physical tasks. For some families, the other parent provided help with physical caregiving. Other participants described hiring personal assistants to aid them with physical tasks. However, some of the participants found that they were not allowed to use government-funded personal assistance services for childcare tasks, and they either paid out-of-pocket for these services, or used the personal care assistants only for household tasks like housecleaning and laundry.

The authors noted that mothers with physical disabilities may utilize a variety of strategies to effectively care for their children, from adaptive equipment to assistance from a co-parent or attendant. The authors also noted that peer support communities (both online and in-person) may be a vital resource for mothers with disabilities to share information with each other. Finally, healthcare providers and social workers may benefit from receiving more training regarding the successful adaptations used by mothers with disabilities, as well as ways to support women with physical disabilities as they prepare for motherhood.

To Learn More

The National Research Center for Parents with Disabilities offers a collection of resources for parents and professionals, including how-to videos from parents demonstrating their adaptations, information sheets on adaptive techniques and equipment, advice from parents to parents, and information for legal and child welfare professionals.

The Disabled Parenting Project, part of the National Research Center for Parents with Disabilities, is an online community by and for parents and prospective parents with disabilities. The website offers videos and photos illustrating adaptive parenting strategies.
AbleData maintains the largest database of assistive technology products and manufacturers. Search for adaptive parenting equipment and check out their factsheets on adaptive strollers and assistive technology for parenting with a disability.

To Learn More About this Study

Research In Focus is a publication of the National Rehabilitation Information Center (NARIC), a library and information center focusing on disability and rehabilitation research, with a special focus on the research funded by NIDILRR. NARIC provides information, referral, and document delivery on a wide range of disability and rehabilitation topics. To learn more about this study and the work of the greater NIDILRR grantee community, visit NARIC at www.naric.com or call 800/346-2742 to speak to an information specialist.

NARIC operates under a contract from the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR), Administration for Community Living, Department of Health and Human Services, contract #GS-06F-0726Z.